

HE LAUGHED AT THE GODS.

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During the course of some psychological investigations I was making, I found it necessary to visit an insane asylum near New York. The building was no more than an ill-smelling barracks, very desolate: but the young interne, who guided me through the place, finally took me to a series of private rooms, which were homelike and pleasant and had windows facing the fields and the hills. He told me by the way that I must above all things see Dr. Farraday. Dr. Farraday, he explained, knew a great deal about the human soul: so much so that the young doctors often consulted him about puzzling and unusual cases.

"He is the most interesting man here," he told me.

"And what is he suffering from?" I asked.

He smiled. "You'll have to get his own diagnosis," he said. "Between you and me, I think he has a high regard for our free board and lodging. He has the sort of insanity of the hobo, of the I-Won't-Works. But he came to it too late in life to make freight cars and hay-lofts at all attractive. He was too settled down to wander the world, and too — well, insane to work."

"Well!" I laughed, "I daresay there are many like him — only they are quartered on relatives, or wives, or friends. . . In ancient days that form of insanity was highly honorable. It is, isn't it, the insanity of the artist?"

His answer was to knock at a door, and a deep and rather pleasing voice cried, "Come in." So we went in.

The light flooded brightly through the tall wide window, so that at first I only saw a dark bulk coming toward us. But I noticed the walls hung with many strange and brilliant drawings, all of a symbolical nature, mythic animals and gods, stars and moons, and landscapes that never were. When I was through blinking, and had my man on the darker side of me, I saw him quite plainly. He was rather bulky and large, swarthy, and something about his face resembling the face of a turtle.

His manner was very courteous, but a little absent. The young interne

excused himself, with a private wink at me, as much as to say : " I won't interfere " ; and so we were left alone.

I offered him a cigar, which pleased him, and we sat in comfortable arm-chairs by the window, and were soon plunged in scientific discussion . . . But I saw he was restless. I noticed, too, now, that his clothes were ill-fitting, worn-out, patched and rather dirty ; that his nails and fingers were sooted up with crayon and stained with ink ; that his cheeks and chin needed a shave and his hair was rather longer than we wear it.

His restlessness increased. He rubbed his chin, gazed about abstractedly, swung his leg back and forth in a too obvious rhythm. And at last he spoke in a voice which did not seem his at all — a voice which appeared to me to belong to some other person. The voice he had used was quiet and cool, although sympathetic. This new voice was personal, hot, and almost bitter.

" What is the use of all this talk ? " he cried out. " It gets us nowhere. Intellect ! science ! theory ! brain-spinning ! Young man, that is our modern devil. Kill him . . . strangle him out of your soul. He is the Devil of the ice, of the cold polar regions. Better a hundred times the old Devil of the burning hell, for in fire there is also God ! "

For a moment I thought I was coming to psychic fisticuffs with him ; but I reflected, and at once swallowed my pride.

" I see, " I said, looking him in the eyes, " you knew this modern Devil very well ; perhaps intimately. "

He glanced at me.

" You sit there, " he cried, " a bit of ice yourself. I feel no warmth from you ; I am not a human being to you, but just another case. Everywhere I look for Christ and find a Devil. But you scientists will never save the world without love — yea, and hate, too. Fire cleanses and resurrects, but the ice freezes and slays. You would embalm me too in your waste places ; and there is no healing in it. Feel this asylum — chilly and cold and full of living death — and the blasted crowd waiting for a great lover to cast out their demons. He is late in coming ; he is late in coming. "

The something that was strange in his voice, his manner and in his words troubled me deeply.

" You are quite right, " I said simply. " Forgive me for my attitude. "

He looked at me attentively and spoke more softly.

" There is some hope for you, then, " he murmured. " Look, " and he reached and brought a sheet of drawing paper from the little table beside him.

He had drawn a picture in crayon, and done it very well. There was a powerful man, with arms crossed on his chest, standing like a Napoleon on an ice-

sheathed rock, and out of the sky a lightning in the form of a great serpent had leaped down and was about to fasten his fangs into the man's eyes.

"Wonderful!" I cried. "And it means?"

"You tell me what it means," he commanded.

It flashed intuitively across my mind that it meant: 'He who sees too much must be struck blind.' I told him and he was highly pleased: he regarded me affectionately.

"This is the first human contact I have had in a long time," he said. "Except, of course, some of the lunatics..."

"But how," I asked, "can a man see too much, and why is such a man like Napoleon?"

"Ah," he said, "when Christ was shown the kingdoms of the world from a high mountain, he chose then between Caesar and the Galilean. Seeing, man — to see, to know — knowledge, they say, is power... But when one is blind then one sees truly... sees inwardly. 'They have eyes, but they see not'..."

I felt his meaning, though, to use the word in his sense, I did not see it.

"And what is the serpent?" I asked.

"The gods."

"Then you believe in the gods?"

"I have always believed in them," he said in his strange voice again, "but I laughed at them. The great Dr. Farraday laughed at the gods. Believed? Of course. The fool says in his heart, There is no God. And the intellectual says in his heart, There are gods, and I laugh at them."

We sat in silence, smoking, and now and then I felt him trying to pierce me with a look. At last he said:

"You are troubled, my friend."

"Yes, I am troubled," I admitted. "We are all troubled in these days."

"The days of the great ice," he murmured. "The second Glacial Period." He paused, then spoke abruptly. "I have a strange feeling for you, very unusual. I am going to tell you something. You may forget it as soon as you have heard it. You may say to yourself: 'It is the phantasy of an insane man.' Or you may find it material for analysis and so enrich your science. Or perhaps if I am not wholly demented, you may take it into your being and find it a gift of the gods... It is a story — one of the few that have meaning for me. And it is about a man I knew — oh, knew very well. Most intimately... Perhaps it is the story of our age. Who knows?"

I looked at him. Our eyes met.

"Tell me," I said.

And he told me...

"His name was Trudo. That name after all is as good as another..."

I must tell you a little about his childhood . . . not much . . . it is not very important. Trudo was a sensitive child ; he couldn't compete with the boys : he was a coward and a stay-at-home. He felt everything so intensely that he suffered incessantly. He could not fight, he could not play ball. And his father, whom he worshipped, died. And his mother was practical and embittered by her struggles and her poverty. Trudo felt he was a worm. Yes, he was vermin. Until he made a discovery . . . If you couldn't beat others with your fists or your skill or your leadership, you could beat them with your mind. And that was the beginning of the end for Trudo . . .

" He resolutely killed all his feelings. It can be done, you know. You become like the snail. His body is soft and fragile : but he draws it into his shell when there is danger of attack. This is what Trudo did. And for the rest, he studied. He became a physician and a man of research. He developed his intellect in a truly marvellous way. And he rose, and was well on the path toward greatness.

" I won't bore you with the details. They are the same for everyone who succeeds. Think of your own successes. Merely imagine Trudo at the top of his profession, living in a very fine house near Central Park on a chaste side street. Respectability, luxury, the waiting room with old masters on the wall, the tiled and shining laboratory, the cushioned library, and so on, and so on . . . It is not important, is it ?

" I pause a moment to speak of his wife. She was a very fine woman, doubtless. Of one of the old New York families. If I mentioned the name, you'd know all about it, I'm sure. And she was religious, in a way, though her god was rather a crude one, a sort of hybrid, not of the sphinx variety exactly, but a good respectable American god. I am not cynical about it either. That god has given us much of America . . . Let me describe him in a word, a line : He was a puritan who believed in hard work, righteousness and business. And he believed in kindness and purity. You see my wife, don't you ? She wanted me to be honest and upright, respectable and wealthy, and at the same time lowly and obedient, — down on my knees to her deity . . . She found me then an anomaly : I was honest, I was wealthy, I was upright ; but I was proud and vain and consumed in myself. I had no love in my heart. You know there was John Brown to prove that a puritan can love like a blast of fire. But also, as you know, a puritan can be a peak of ice.

" Now I must tell you a great joke. My patients thought me a second Jesus. Actually. And why ? Because I was remarkably intuitive. I could pierce direct into their souls, and so I knew just what to say and to do to make them feel I was in full sympathy with them. Is there anything more devilish than that ? I ask you. Think. To use the art of love to serve merely one's ambi-

tion and one's egotism. To wear the mask of Christ in order to be a great doctor. Good old American bluff, isn't it?"

He paused, and took a puff on his cigar. It was as if he had forgotten my presence. Indeed he did not seem to realize that he had dropped speaking of 'Trudo' and was speaking directly of himself, in the first person.

Then he went on, his voice growing warm and poignant.

"My wife warned me, often. She said I had slain my soul, and was headed for a great crash. She pointed out how many of our great business-men make forced marches on success and are killed or driven insane or into a sanitarium before they are fifty. I agreed with her. But what could I do? The greatest tragedy of my life was the fact that it was a comedy. I knew all the facts, but I didn't care a snap of my fingers. I could not feel the tragedy. I was perfectly happy on the ice — that is, if you can call it happy. Perhaps, to put it more honestly, I was neither glad nor sad, but busy, alert and keen.

"Then the symptoms came. I will not enter into the details. Palpitation of the heart, for instance — a very bad symptom, as you know. You see, I had no heart: so it was just there that the gods began to make mischief. Ah, yes, I knew then that the gods I had laughed at were preparing a little doomsday for me. Man does not live by intellect alone. If thou hast two loaves of bread, sell one, and buy hyacinths for thy soul. Lord! I said those very words to myself at the time. But of what avail?

"Obviously there was nothing I could do — except one thing. I could put away Mammon — I could give up my practice, my fine house, my scientific researches. But what modern successful man can do it? It was exactly like the rich young man who went to Jesus. And Jesus asked him if he could give up his wealth: leave all, and follow. And the young man could not. That was I.

"No. My pride and revolt increase, if anything. And I even became cold toward my wife. And this killed her. I looked on her dead face, and not even then could I break through the ice, and drop one poor tear of pity or self-pity.

"You see, I was utterly lost. And now with my wife dead, and no children, and no true friends, you might have thought that it would be easy to let go of the power of the world. But not so. Not so. The decks were cleared for action, that was all. I was going to do a great bit of scientific writing...

"Then the lightning struck me. Oh, it was so simple, so simple. I was walking one night on a side-street on the lower west side. And a prostitute accosted me. I had a sudden burning curiosity. I was curious about the psychology of prostitution. I would go with this woman, and study her. I had no desire. I was a puritan. I did not want to touch her. Ugh! as a physician I knew too much about the diseases of vice...

"She took me then to her dingy hall bedroom in a cheap lodging house. I sat on the cot ; she sat on a soap-box. And in the gaslight I saw her : a very thin woman, a little tall, and perhaps tubercular. Shining eyes and glowing cheeks. And she was very poor."

He groaned, and stopped. Then he whispered :

"Now the story begins . . . I began questioning her, when suddenly she burst out on me :

" ' But you are not a human being. You are terrible. I feel as if the Devil himself were in this room. '

"I was startled. I asked her :

" ' Who are you ? Where do you come from ? '

" ' I am a Russian, ' she said, ' and a Jewess. My name is Loshka. '

" ' But are not you in league with the Devil also ? '

" ' No, ' she cried defiantly, rising before me and clenching her fists. ' I am driven by need and loneliness : but you are only vain and learned. You are a lost soul. '

" ' Yes, ' I admitted in my honest way, ' I *am* lost. What's to be done about it ? '

" ' You know you are lost, ' she cried, ' and yet ask me that ? Oh, this is terrible. This is the eternal damnation they talk about . . . '

" ' That doesn't help me, ' I said. ' Talk has never helped me. I can talk myself. '

She stared at me, and leaned toward me.

" ' You are right. Only an infinite love could help you. '

"That was the way we talked. And suddenly I forgot that I was the questioner and had a great desire to tell her about myself. I told everything, just as I have told you. It was amazing enough : an ignorant sick woman of the gutter, one whose body was common merchandise, and who had no life of her own, and I, the learned scientist, the respectable and wealthy doctor.

"Three times I went to see her. And at the third the lightning passed through me. She was weeping when I entered and would not rise from the bed. Her face was buried in her hands.

" ' Why are you crying, Loshka ? ' I asked.

" ' I weep, ' she said, ' because you are to be pitied more than I am. We are both prostitutes. But the Devil in me is a god, and you have no god. '

"I stood, silent, but quite calm. Then she rose slowly and flung her arms about my neck. I had not expected it. She whispered passionately :

" ' I love you. I love you. I love you. '

" ' Why do you love ? ' I asked.

" ' Because I am your lost soul. '

"And I saw the truth. I saw that what lay buried in me was not only divine love, but also the great beast, and that this woman was both. And first I felt a burning steal through my body, a hot and primal fire, the smoky breath of hell itself, and for the first time I could remember I had the horrible cannibal lust to tear a human body limb from limb. But while I was convulsed with this, something strangely other came up and mingled with the lust. It was as if I saw the Christ. It was holy and ecstatic and divine . . . Yes, yes, yes, it was love . . .

"You can imagine an earthquake that raises some monstrous buried formation to the surface and buries what it finds there. That happened to me . . . It was like a conversion. But in my conversion both Christ and the beast came up and tore asunder the great Dr. Farraday — the fine intellect, the high-minded ego . . .

"In short, I went suddenly mad, and gave a great shriek, tearing off my clothes and foaming at the mouth. I called Losha 'the goddess' and prostrated myself before her. Then I shrieked aloud for the torture and agony and had something very like a fit of epilepsy.

"She was terrified. She finally put me to bed, and soothed me. She nursed me tenderly. I would lie quiescent for hours, in a fever. Then the spell was on me. I saw great beasts, kings and gods. I was ground by terrible passion and ecstasy. It was a death. . . ."

He paused; then smiled sadly . . .

"You can imagine the sequel. I could not return to my house. It was all ended. All my interest in my work, my position, my power and place in the world, had vanished. Everything, but the emotions that swept me, was quite unreal. And so I ruined myself.

"I married Losha. It seemed a simple matter. And we opened a little stationery shop and kept it together. . . . And then I began to draw: I became an artist. I was alive from head to foot, and yet quite tormented — tormented by these terrible passions and ecstasies, these perverted and glorious impulses which for years had festered in my darkness, and which, when they came upon me, came more like monsters than divinities . . .

"What can I say of Losha? She was the one woman whom I never knew. My intuition failed me. I never understood. Was she ugly or beautiful? stupid or wise? base or noble? I cannot tell. I only could know her simple and undivided love, which never forsook me. It was those fires in which I became as ashes.

"As ashes, ashes . . . One cold morning she coughed a great big racking spasm . . . Then she whispered to me:

" 'Trudo, I love you.' "

" And she died . . . I closed the shop . . . I did not need the shop. I needed only my own soul, which began to dawn in me like the sun in spring . . . And being quite insane, I came here . . . "

We were silent. He fussed about among his papers, and murmured :

" I suppose it isn't much of a story. "

I smiled at him, but said nothing. Then he showed me a portrait he had made of Losha.

She was dark and thin, even gaunt, and a look almost of madness in the eyes . . . The tears rolled down the Doctor's cheeks . . .

A little later I said goodby to him. We stood, facing each other and he held my hand.

" I am insane, " he said, " do not forget that. And out there — " he waved his other hand in the direction of New York, " live the sane ones. Losha is dead, and Dr. Farraday is dead. You know the ancients, " he smiled quaintly, " thought the insane were close to the gods. But that's a fable, isn't it ? "

I closed the door on him very softly, troubled in spirit .